

Survivors of Deadly Tornadoes Serve Others in Their Time of Grief

The Wired Word for the Week of March 17, 2019

In the News

"Tell someone you love them every day," Cora Jones told a reporter days after losing her parents, brother, and seven other extended family members in the Alabama "monster tornado" that killed 23 and injured some 90 others on Sunday, March 3. The youngest victim was 6, the oldest 89. Four children were among the dead.

"Just that quick my mom and my dad and my brother were gone," Jones mourned. "I didn't have no idea I was seeing my mama for the last time, and I would have had so many things to tell her, and I couldn't tell her. I didn't know it was my last time."

What would she have wanted to tell her, she was asked.

"That I love her," Jones answered.

"Love one another," she urged.

The rural community of Beauregard in Lee County, 60 miles northeast of Montgomery, was hardest hit, with four tornadoes, including an EF-4 storm with winds of 170 mph that cut a path more than a mile wide and nearly 27 miles long.

Tornadoes are measured on the Enhanced Fujita scale from 0 to 5 based on intensity and damage caused.

About 30 tornadoes touched down that Sunday across the Southeast, in what officials at the National Weather Service are calling a "tornado outbreak" and what Susie Hardy, whose home in Smiths Station, Alabama, was destroyed, described as "Armageddon."

She and her husband Troy survived, along with their 4-year-old grandson, hidden under a heavy mattress. Troy, who had been an Army staff sergeant, said the neighborhood looked like a war zone, worse than anything he had ever seen during his military service, because this time it involved his family.

The Lee County twister was the deadliest to hit the United States since an EF-5 tornado killed 24 people in Moore, Oklahoma, in 2013.

Makitha Griffin lost five family members to the tornadoes, including two aunts, two uncles and a cousin. Griffin asked for prayer for another cousin, now orphaned, who was hospitalized with injuries suffered in the storm.

The day after the storm, Griffin joined dozens of volunteers to feed first responders and displaced persons.

People are pitching in to help, using whatever skills or resources they have to offer.

The Poarch Band of Creek Indians is donating \$184,000 to cover funeral costs for victims who died in the March 3 tornado.

Veterinarians are caring for pets whose owners were unknown or deceased due to the storm.

Businesses organized benefits to raise money for the recovery effort.

In Beauregard, Dax Leandro helped his friend's mom clean up debris from her property, trying to find anything of value to restore to the family.

Louie Evans, a member of the Tuskegee-Lee Baptist Association Disaster Relief Team, spent hours with his team of nine cutting 2,000 trees for another team of volunteers to haul away as communities begin the cleanup operation.

"It is at times of greatest need that we often see our communities coming together to help one another," said Stephanie A. Bryan, the Poarch Creek Indian tribe's chair and CEO. "This is one of those times. Our thoughts and prayers are with all of those affected."

Kathy Ledbetter came to Providence Baptist Church to help sort donated clothing in what has become a makeshift distribution center for supplies for those in need. Her granddaughter Mary Payton joined her. Kathy said, "I think kids need to learn to give back to their community, but also it helps them to appreciate more."

Growing up, Griffin said, she learned the importance of community.

"Everybody was still family whether they were related or not," she said. "We gotta help our families."

"At the end of the day it was so many other people that needed to be healed," Griffin said.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Woman Mourning 5 Relatives Who Died in Alabama Tornadoes Is Feeding First Responders. *CNN*

Survivors and Families Who Lost Loved Ones are Being Embraced by Their Alabama Communities After the Tornadoes. *WGNO.com*

Tuskegee Team Puts Beliefs to Action for Tornado Survivors. *WSFA.com*

A Native American Tribe Will Cover the Costs of the Funerals for All of the Alabama Tornado Victims. *CNN*

After Deadly Tornado, Survivors Face Freezing Temperatures Amid Power Outages. *PBS.org*

The Big Questions

1. To the extent you feel comfortable sharing, what is the most traumatic experience you have had in your family, church and/or community? How did life change as a result of that experience?
2. What role, if any, did faith play in your journey through communal trauma?
3. What would you like to tell the church about the best way to help people who are going through long-term trauma? What should the church know about what is *not* helpful to people at such a time?
4. When might service to others be a useful coping skill for people who have experienced a traumatic event?
5. What other coping skills have you found helpful in managing the aftereffects of trauma, if complete recovery is not realistic or probable?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Job 2:11-13

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home -- Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (For context, read 1:13-22; 2:7-13.)

At the beginning of Job's story, the wealthy landowner was living large, with seven sons, three daughters and many possessions. But then he was hit by a series of devastating events: multiple attacks of marauders who stole his cattle and killed his servants, a wildfire that burned up his flocks and shepherders, and a powerful wind event in which all 10 of his children were killed when the house in which they were dining collapsed.

Initially, Job expressed his anguish by tearing his robe and shaving his head. But he also worshiped the Lord, acknowledging God's right to give and to take away what he had given, whenever he might choose to do so.

After that, Job was afflicted with painful sores all over his body. His own wife suggested he should just curse God and die. But this Job refused to do. It didn't seem right to him to happily accept blessings from God but be unwilling to accept adversity.

Job's three friends came to offer him comfort. At first, they identified with his grief by tearing their robes as well, weeping and throwing dust upon their heads in gestures of mourning. They sat in solidarity with him for an entire week without saying a word. Later, they conversed with him at length, but one could argue that their silent presence was more helpful to Job than all their speeches.

Questions: What actions and/or words on the part of others were most comforting to you when you have experienced grief? What actions and/or words have been less helpful?

Mark 6:34, 41-42

As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ... Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; (For context, read 6:30-46.)

The feeding of the five thousand takes place at a time of personal grief for Jesus and communal trauma for his people, after King Herod had Jesus' cousin John (the Baptist) beheaded in prison. John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb (vv. 27-29).

The callous brutality of the execution must have terrorized and grieved the people who honored and respected John.

For Jesus, John's death was a personal loss, compounded by the fact that John had been the herald who introduced Jesus to the world when he began his public ministry. Their lives and

ministries were so intertwined that the attack on John must have felt like a portent of the suffering that was still to come for Jesus himself.

Jesus had sent his disciples out on a mission, and upon their return, they briefed him about their trip. Knowing they needed a rest, Jesus encouraged them to slip away from the crowds, but their retreat was cut short because the people figured out where they were going and met them there (vv. 30-33).

Even while experiencing his own profound grief, Jesus considered the needs of his disciples and of the community as a whole. He went out of his way to satisfy their spiritual and physical hunger and to heal the sick (vv. 53-56).

Question: How do you balance the need for self-care with the call to serve others?

Acts 8:1-4

And Saul approved of their killing [Stephen]. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. (For context, read 8:1-8.)

After Jesus' ascension, his disciples faced opposition similar to the kind he had encountered. One of the men chosen to distribute food equitably among the widows in the church, Stephen, preached the gospel with such power that some enemies seized him and brought false charges against him (Acts 6:1-15).

The defense Stephen presented so enraged his accusers that they stoned him to death (Acts 7:54-60).

Most of the believers were displaced by the violence mounted against the Jerusalem church. They did not hide the extent of their communal trauma or the depth of their grief, but they also proclaimed the word wherever they went.

One of Stephen's fellow deacons, Philip, went to Samaria, where his preaching and works of healing and exorcism brought great joy to the Samaritans.

Questions: What are some ways a traumatized community may grieve together, leading to some measure of catharsis and healing? What gave the scattered believers the strength they needed to proclaim the word even though their lives were turned upside down?

1 Corinthians 12:7, 27

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (For context, read 12:4-14, 27.)

Paul compared the church to a human body. In the body of Christ, Jesus is the head, and individual believers are the various limbs and organs in the body. Each member of the body is to function for the benefit of the whole, "for the common good."

Even when immersed in her own grief, Makitha Griffin reached out to serve others, both the hurting and the helpers. Whether or not Griffin is a Christian, she's clearly incarnating God's care for the people who need care, which is to say she is Jesus' hands and feet and heart here on Earth.

Maybe you've heard the story about a little girl who was afraid of the dark. After her father put her to bed one night, it didn't take long before he heard her whimper, then whine, and finally wail in panic. He returned to her side to remind her that God was always with her. "I know, Daddy," his daughter answered, "But I want God with skin on!"

Revelation 21:4 says God will wipe away every tear, but in this life, God uses human hands to do that. Psalm 34:18 says the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit, but this side of paradise the brokenhearted feel God's closeness through human agency. Psalm 147:3 says God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds; we know that God uses people to accomplish that.

Questions: In your experience, what is the most striking example (other than Jesus himself) of someone embodying the love of God?

How can you make yourself available for God to use your hands to wipe away tears, to come near to the brokenhearted to heal and bind up their wounds?